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# Assertion of Self and Existentialist Angst in Tishani Doshi's Listening to Abida Parveen on Loop I Understand Why I Miss Home and Why It Must Be So

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**Abstract:**

Tishani Doshi emerges as a distinguished, resonant voice among the contemporary Indian poetic canon. The canvas of her oeuvre is vast enough to accommodate the diversity of themes ranging from immigration, ageing, and existential moorings to such banality as her identifying with the fate of some Madras women facing hardships because of their missing children. The poem in question is replete with images and figures wherein the poetic persona desperately looks for 'home' to give her some respite from the boredom and monotony which have choked and suffocated her. Even the world of nature echoes her inner cravings of the self; it becomes another powerful image wherein the speaker is seen communicating with nature as the poet quite often does use it as a leading motif elsewhere in her poetry. The speaker's odyssey culminates in the beautiful ambience of divinity after having suffered terribly in her quests in life in all its grandeur and triviality, while at the same time being open to renouncing anything including her wished-for 'home' in pursuit of peace and contentment. The paper is a modest attempt to exhibit how the poet endeavours to assert her distinct self not just as a woman of some defiant stance but as an individual who, despite finding herself entangled in the labyrinth of human condition, forges her way through some mystic, divine impulse.

**Keywords:** Angst, Banality, Craving, Existential, Self, Unrequited, Versatility.

## INTRODUCTION

Tishani Doshi is an Indian poet and dancer who is widely acclaimed for her versatility as a creative writer, poet, novelist, performer, traveler and sports columnist. She is a prolific writer, for she has several collections of Poems, fiction, stories and essays to her credit. She has won Forward Poetry Prize for her debut poetic volume *Countries of the Body* (2006), which was launched at a

festival alongside such towering literary figures as Seamus Heaney and Margaret Atwood. In 2001, she received Eric Gregory Award for young poets below thirty years. Her first novel, *The Pleasures Seekers* was shortlisted for The Hindu Best Fiction Award in 2010 and also long-listed for the Orange Prize in 2011. Her latest collection of poems, *A God at the Door* was shortlisted for the 2021 Forward Prize under best poetry collection category and the poem under discussion forms part of the same volume of poetry.

Abida Parveen, who has inspired the present poem, is one of the finest sufi singers of Pakistan and undoubtedly dubbed as 'Queen of Sufi music'. The range and breadth of her singing is simply awe-inspiring, especially for someone who finds himself inclined and akin to the existential, spiritual moorings in a world which is filled with so much of hankering after material pursuits—Tishani Doshi being no exception to such leanings. This world which is driven by materialist tendencies only does not yield the kind of peace and satisfaction one looks forward to attain after tasting success in such pursuits. To find peace and contentment, such a person looks for ways and means to renounce the life with its wherewithal which is more often than not surrounded by absurdity and monotony.

It is perhaps these sort of issues the poet is challenged by among others, whose representation and reflection she finds in Abida Parveen's work and, may be, it has triggered her ennui and angst in the form of the poem under discussion.

Woven with the transcendental loop of mysticism around the nostalgia—homesickness axis, Tishani Doshi's 'Listening to Abida ... Must Be So' is a gentle query rather than a resolution to the crisis productive of self—world contest. Bracketed within the biographical perspective, the

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poet is overcome with loads of dissatisfaction on listening to the melancholic and yearning sobbing from the legendary singer. For, in most of the songs, Abida Parveen, in her flight for contentment relies on mystic/divine communion even at the cost of her material existentiality. Tishani Doshi too seems to have felt subdued to the extent of getting extremely apprehensive of the material/corporeal atmosphere around her; the fact duly attested by the refrain beginning each time with ‘what if’.

Looking at the title of the poem, the poet is in search of ‘home’ which unsurprisingly she has not been able to locate/find despite the fact that she already resides in one; however, it serves only as a poor substitute. It is the singer’s outpourings which make the poet realize why she must miss home, may be drawing for her the picture of what a home should be like. The poem opens with an existential cry wherein the poetic persona is kind of suffering from monotony and boredom in life which is suffocating and frustrating for her. Even the world of nature echoes her inner cravings of the self; it becomes second powerful image of the poem wherein the speaker is seen communicating with nature as the poet quite often does use it as a leading motif elsewhere in her poetry. The speaker of the poem is even ready to renounce and sacrifice whatever little or symbolic assets she has got, not only as a human being lost in wilderness but more precisely as a woman, to feel at home in the real sense of the term. When the poem progresses we find the speaker keeping herself rooted and grounded Frostlike—whose speaker in Birches wants to soar high but simultaneously ensures to remain firmly grounded rather than getting lost in flight, when she says:

“I would do it if meant I could go back and everything would be as I left it bread on table bowl of salt apple tree river and its stepping stones returned to me”.

A brazen picture of desolation evolves with the use of words like desert, wind, shell, and sea used only to taunt than to console a displaced but independent individual. The abject selfishness for the sake of absolute independence is frowned upon as there is an imminent fear of estrangement (‘Enkidu from his herd’) with the realities and familiarities facilitated by the worldly surroundings. This (not unlike Kamala Das) self-realisation (in fact the first phase before actual realisation or communion/nirvana) reverts the poet to her original roots and develops in her a

craving for the adoption of the expected role. The poet has a great fascination for dogs as she mentions in her interviews. In the current poem too, she offers to make the animal a companion in this cruel world but hastens to add that you cannot guarantee durability of this new-found relationship either. Who knows the new companion like the other fellow humans may forsake you for his own good and leave you estranged as before? Further, the speaker asserts that if somehow she becomes insensitive to what is happening around her (“What if my heart is taken out of me...”), she ‘could begin each day with praise/ could serve and work without once uttering the word home’: the point is that she is not going to miss home in such circumstances as she would be oblivious to the immediate, harsh realities of life which would otherwise choke her to long for home. However, in such state of eerie, transitory calm, she could feel emboldened with some supernatural power as depicted through the image of ‘Apis Nandi cosmic bull running into [her]’.

The next image the poet draws is of a world ravaged by radioactive substance. However, strangely the poet finds it quite ok to live and survive under these circumstances. Even she is able to espouse hope in such a horrible state of affairs which is being symbolized by ‘the bird song’ in the poem. The song compensates for killing the only source of life—‘poisoned well’.

The poet does all this to look at life objectively from myriad perspectives—she probes life on a psychological plane: examining life at home, away from home, in friendly and in hostile conditions. Towards the concluding part of the poem, the poet is candid enough to affirm:

“We are homesick everywhere even when we’re home we are empty things that need filling”

Here, the speaker gives out a desperate cry of companionship, of love to her beloved but perhaps to no avail as the readers are not able to find any trace of him. She passionately offers herself to be loved, cared for and looked after but no remedy seems to be at hand to her unrequited pangs of love:

“We are always lost in love never found please come find me”

In her old age she craves for love which would satiate her hunger to the full; but to her dismay there is hardly anyone offering it. However, she doesn’t let herself be immersed

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in the recesses of pessimism but instead stays firm to aspire hard for the companionship of god himself; thus overcoming the material constraints.

**CONCLUSION**

To derive satisfaction in an otherwise chaotic world whether in home or outside the poet strives for something extraordinary i.e., the companionship of god/communion/ nirvana. The ‘frugal diet of living’ has had a good toll of her health—physical, mental as well as spiritual which is why she is committed to sacrifice her ‘self’ in its entirety for a loftier and divine cause than something worldly and perishable. She believes to add to the joy of god himself; to rid him of his loneliness. With her troubled self, the poet tries to reach for a spiritual or visionary response. She passionately beseeches for a mystical transcendence to the world of ultimate nirvana/communion/ contentment.

The poem comes a full circle—it began on a note of monotony and absurdist angst wherein the poet could find herself choked and suffocated as hostility of life was taking a heavy toll on her existence; and it has culminated in the beautiful ambience of divinity in which the poet, having experienced profusely and suffered terribly in her pursuits in life in all its colours without perhaps succeeding in dominating it although the courage with which she fought it must be acknowledged. Thus, she leaves behind her ego/self/identity and becomes one with god in whom she finds her home:

“What if god on the other side of the wall was equally alone and in need of company What if we replaced god with home.

What if I was ready to become nothing What if I understood there was no me Would you carry me to this divinity”

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